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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SANAA 000426

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PREL YM DOMESTIC POLITICS

SUBJECT: SALEH - AL-AHMAR TENSIONS PORTEND THE LAUNCH OF A PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN FOR 2006, AND BEYOND

REF: SANAA 37

Classified By: DCM Nabeel Khoury for reasons 1.5 (b and d).

(C) Summary and Comment: A public war of words between President Saleh and opposition party, chief Sheikh al-Ahmar, sparked by al-Ahmar's speech on the state of the economy, reflects ongoing political maneuvering between President Saleh's GPC and Islah in the run-up to the September 2006 presidential election. A February 14 article in GPC mouthpiece "al-Mithaq," which attacked al-Ahmar and his sons for corrupt business dealings and mismanagement of tribal affairs, marked the start of public wrangling. A February 20 senior GPC delegation visit to al-Ahmar offered apologies for the attacks and briefly reduced public sparring between the parties. Political observers and insiders suggest that 2006 and the more critical 2012 presidential elections are behind the Saleh-sanctioned attacks on the powerful leader of his own Hamid tribe. Under the constitution, Saleh is prohibited from running again in 2012. Some speculate that Saleh fears Islah will try to block his son Ali Ahmed from inheriting his father's "throne" in 2012 by nominating a "real" opposition candidate for the first time. This could be the opening salvo in a succession war that could heat up over the next few months, while remaining totally undeclared, for the time being. End Summary and Comment.

Al-Ahmar Criticizes Economy -- No Saleh Endorsement

(C) In the closing speech at Islah's third political convention February 12, Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar warned of a "potential (economic) disaster" if the diesel subsidies are reduced later this year. He continued, "The current deteriorating political and economic situation necessitates a responsible stand ... to take the country away from the dark impasse it is going through, before it is too late." Observers were quick to point out that the Islah convention did not endorse Saleh for the 2006 race, as some had expected, given that the next General Party meeting will not occur until after the September 2006 presidential elections.

GPC Lashes Out

(C) On February 14, GPC mouthpiece al-Mithaq responded to Sheikh al-Ahmar's criticism of ROYG economic policies by calling al-Ahmar the "gate keeper of the dark tunnel" facing Yemen. (Note: Al-Mithaq editorials are widely believed sanctioned by the President's office. End Note.) Authored by the political editor of the paper, the article states "Al-Ahmar and his sons' trading empire, from Saba Bank to Sabafon to oil companies, was acquired by "force and deceit." Most pointedly, the article repeats the widely believed rumor that al-Ahmar receives large financial donations from a "sister nation" i.e. Saudi Arabia. The article further alleges, "al-Ahmar takes money from (his own) Hashid tribes," directly attacking his leadership of the powerful northern confederation. In a strong sign of disrespect, the article did not address al-Ahmar by his honorific title of sheikh, referring to him only as Abdullah al-Ahmar. (Comment: The al-Ahmar family has amassed considerable wealth via questionable business practices. While vulnerable to accusations of unethical practices, the family is not atypical of other Yemeni elite families. End comment).

Islah-GPC Coalition for 2006?

(C) Although the controversial al-Mithaq article was billed as a response to al-Ahmar's party convention speech, it is not likely the real cause of the personal attack. According to Parliament watcher Saad Edine al-Talib, GPC officials were irked by the lack of Islah's endorsement of President Saleh for another term in office, an indication that negotiations between Islah and the GPC over the 2006 presidential election may have broken down. Islah may be withholding its endorsement in an effort to force the ROYG to weaken or postpone the proposed lifting of subsidies in "doses," unpopular among the population. (Note: in 2001 Islah and GPC endorsed Saleh, and Saleh's 'opponent' was another member

of his own GPC party. End Note). Talib believes that in a recent meeting at al-Ahmar's residence, the Islah Supreme Council, including Sheikh Zindani, agreed on the terms for a deal in 2006 in return for GPC support for a strong Islah candidate in 2012. Reportedly, Saleh has not endorsed such a deal.

First Salvo in the Succession War?

¶5. (C) Al-Ahmar's speech was not remarkable in and of itself, as Islah has publicly criticized the economic reform package since it was introduced in Parliament in 2004. Deputy Foreign Minister Mustafa Noman called the public criticism of al-Ahmar "most impolite," saying that the GPC attacked al-Ahmar in a very personal manner in response to a purely political speech. Noman is convinced that the attack on al-Ahmar was a retaliation for an interview al-Ahmar gave three weeks ago in Qatari Arabic daily 'as-Sharq.' In Qatar for the occasion of a royal wedding, al-Ahmar told the paper "we are against a hereditary presidency," and wondered, "Why did we overthrow the Imam, if we now have a King?" (Comment: Given that local journalists have been arrested and jailed for even raising the issue of succession, if the quote is accurate, it is indeed a bold one. End Comment). Talib agreed with Noman's analysis, suggesting this may well be the opening salvo in the succession war as Saleh maneuvers first to extend his tenure and ultimately to hand the presidency over to his son Ali Ahmed.

(C) The talk at some Qat chews is that al-Ahmar's tribal honor has been maligned and that, according to Yemeni culture, he must react. Talib and others believe that al-Ahmar may loosen his reins on the tribes, which could portend more tribal violence. Such disruptions might undermine Saleh's control over the northern areas. Noman disagrees, saying al-Ahmar would never unleash the tribes as he knows that in the end he cannot win against government troops. Instead, The DFM believes al-Ahmar will "extort" another lucrative government contract for one of his sons in return for toning down the words with the President. (Note: Hamid al-Ahmar, the Sheikh's eldest son, currently owns the largest power generation project in Yemen's history. End Note). Noman pointed out that al-Ahmar is really "part of the regime." Islah would never run a presidential candidate unless al-Ahmar disappears from the scene, said the DFM, Islah needs him for protection, and he needs Islah for cover as a national political figure vice a mere northern tribal leader.

After Apology al-Ahmar still not Mollified,
Parliament Watches Tensely

(C) On February 17, several tribal dignitaries converged on al-Ahmar's house pledging allegiance to him, regardless of party affiliation. Some contacts speculate that Saleh's February 19 announcement of an investigation into the al-Mithaq article is a conciliatory step in the ongoing war of words. The Deputy Editor-in-Chief called into question is a former YSP party member, and the investigation could be a convenient way to purge the ranks of al-Mithaq.

(C) On February 20, GPC leader and Shura Council Chairman Abd al-Aziz al-Ghani, along with a delegation of GPC officials, visited al-Ahmar to formally apologize and offered to make their contrition public. Al-Ahmar initially welcomed the move and asked that the journalists be held accountable. In a 2/23 al-Wasat article, however, al-Ahmar called the GPC apology "cold" and repeated his demands that the editors be prosecuted. The Al-Wasat editor asked if the reason behind the attack was the Qatari interview, al-Ahmar responded, "What I said is what other Yemenis say" and affirmed his rejection to "succession" except if the person is nominated in an democratic way. Not to be outdone, a GPC information department officer told al-Bayan daily that Saleh will not apologize to al-Ahmar. Talib reported on February 27, that Parliament is "tense" and regular proceedings have been disrupted as members await resolution of the spat.

Will the Saleh Dynasty Hold?

(C) Comment: Briefly after the Iraq war, public pictures of the President were taken down. With just over a year before the 2006 elections, Pictures of Saleh are returning and now the most devoted carry prominent pictures of Saleh and Son in aviator glasses on the rear-windshield of their cars. If true, Islah's bargaining for the Presidency in 2012 interferes with Presidential planning for a Saleh dynasty. Saleh's current wrangling with al-Ahmar signals that he cannot take tribal allegiance for granted in his own reelection in 2006, let alone in paving the way for his son to succeed him in 2012. End Comment.

Krajeski